THE METAPHYSICS OF CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS · VOLUME I

# The Ground of Being

## The Absolute, Universal Mind, and the Philosophy of Consciousness

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Free Sample · Chapter One

The Absolute and the Unknowable Principle

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**PART ONE**

# Ultimate Reality

**Chapter One**

# The Absolute and the Unknowable Principle

*Time was not, for it lay asleep in the infinite bosom of duration.*
*Universal mind was not, for there were no Ah-hi to contain it.*

— Stanzas of Dzyan, Stanza I

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.*

— Tao Te Ching, chapter 1

## A Night in the Desert

Some years after he came home from his second deployment, a man we will call Daniel began sleeping outside.

He had a house. He had a bed, and a wife who loved him, and a dog who would have slept on his feet if he had let her. But on certain nights, and there were more of them than he liked to admit, the walls of the house began to press in on him. The ceiling felt too low. The air felt used. And so he would take a sleeping bag and drive out past the last streetlights, out into the high desert of New Mexico, and lie on his back on the hard ground and look up.

He told us later that he did not go out there to think. He went out there to stop thinking. In the house, his mind went around and around the same tracks: the things he had seen, the things he had done, the friends who had not come home, the question of why he had and they

had not. Under the open sky, something different happened. The stars came out by the thousands, and then by the tens of thousands, and then the Milky Way rose like smoke over the ridge, and his mind, confronted with all that, simply went quiet.

"It wasn't peace exactly," he said. "Peace sounds too nice. It was more like I got small. Not small in a bad way. Small like a kid gets small when his father picks him up. I was lying there, and it was all so big, and it had been there so long, and it was going to be there so long after me, and somehow that made my problems the right size for the first time in years."

Then he said something that we have never forgotten.

"But here's the thing. After a while I started to feel like the stars weren't the biggest thing out there. Like they were floating in something. Not the dark, exactly. The dark was just what it looked like. Something behind the dark. Something the stars were happening *in*. And I couldn't see it, and I couldn't think about it, and every time I tried to think about it, it disappeared. But I knew it was there. I knew it the way you know somebody's standing behind you in a room."

He was quiet for a while. Then: "Is that crazy?"

No. It is not crazy. It is one of the oldest experiences human beings have recorded, and it has been described, in nearly identical terms, by mystics and philosophers on every continent and in every century. Daniel, lying in the desert with no training in metaphysics, had stumbled onto the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine.

He had felt the Absolute.

## The Rootless Root

The opening pages of *The Secret Doctrine* are among the strangest in all of Western religious literature. Before Blavatsky says anything about gods or angels, planes or principles, cycles or races, she tells her reader that the foundation of everything she is about to describe cannot be described at all.

She calls it an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable Principle, one on which all speculation is impossible, because it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or likeness. It is, she says, beyond the range and reach of thought, and she borrows the language of the Mandukya Upanishad to call it unthinkable and unspeakable.

This is not the God of the Sunday school. It is not a person, not a creator who sits outside the world and decides to make it, not a judge who weighs souls, not a father who can be pleased or disappointed. Blavatsky is emphatic about this. The Absolute is not a being at all, not even the supreme being. It is not even "It" in any sense that would make it one thing among others. She reaches for a strange word, *Be-ness*, to suggest something prior even to the distinction between being and non-being. In the Sanskrit tradition she draws upon, it is called *Sat*, reality itself, or *Parabrahman*, that which is beyond even Brahman.

She also calls it the rootless root and the causeless cause. Everything has a root; this is the root that has no root. Everything has a cause; this is the cause that has no cause. It is not the first link in the chain of causes, because the first link would still be a link, still one thing among others, still part of the chain. It is that within which the whole chain hangs.

And it is that to which everything returns. In Blavatsky's cosmology, universes are breathed out from the Absolute and breathed back in again, across spans of time so vast that the mind reels at them. Every galaxy, every star, every living creature, every thought and feeling

and dream, arises within this boundless Reality, endures for its season, and dissolves back into it. The Absolute does not come and go. It is that in which coming and going take place.

Read the opening of the first Stanza of Dzyan, the ancient verses on which Blavatsky's whole work is a commentary, and you can feel her trying to describe the indescribable by describing what was not yet there:

*The Eternal Parent wrapped in her ever invisible robes had slumbered once again for seven eternities. Time was not, for it lay asleep in the infinite bosom of duration. Universal mind was not, for there were no Ah-hi to contain it.*

Notice what is being said. Before the manifestation of a universe, there was no time, no universal mind, no beings, nothing that could be counted or named. And yet the passage does not say that there was simply nothing. It speaks of an Eternal Parent, slumbering. It speaks of duration, infinite and asleep. Something was there that was not any thing. Something was present that could not be said to exist in the way that things exist, and yet was more real than anything that exists.

That is what Daniel felt behind the dark.

## The Long Tradition of Unknowing

It would be easy to dismiss all of this as poetry, or as the special vocabulary of a single eccentric Victorian. But the remarkable thing is how many of the greatest minds in history, working independently, in different languages, in different centuries, have arrived at exactly the same place.

In India, nearly three thousand years ago, the sage Yajnavalkya was asked by his students to describe the ultimate Reality, the Self that underlies all selves. His answer, preserved in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, has become one of the most famous phrases in the history of spirituality: *neti, neti*. Not this, not this. Whatever you can point to, whatever you can name, whatever you can grasp with the senses or

the mind, that is not it. The Self is not this body. Not these thoughts. Not these feelings. Not even the most exalted concept you can form of the divine. Not this, not this. And when every "this" has been set aside, what remains is not nothing. What remains is the very awareness that was doing the setting aside.

In China, the opening line of the Tao Te Ching makes the same point with a brevity that has never been bettered: the Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name. The book that follows spends eighty-one short chapters talking about something it has declared, in its first sentence, cannot be talked about. This is not a contradiction. It is an invitation to read between the words.

In the Greek world of the third century, the philosopher Plotinus, perhaps the greatest mystic-philosopher of the West, taught that beyond all things, beyond even Mind and Being, there is the One. The One is not one thing among many. It is not even, strictly speaking, a being, for being already implies a certain definiteness, a certain this-and-not-that. The One is beyond being. It is the source from which Mind and Soul and the whole visible world flow forth, as light flows from the sun, without the sun being in any way diminished. And because it is beyond all qualities, Plotinus taught, it can be approached not by adding concepts but by removing them, by stripping away everything that is not the One until the soul stands, as he put it in the famous last words of the *Enneads*, alone with the alone.

In medieval Christianity, a mysterious writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite taught that God is beyond every name we give to God, beyond goodness, beyond being, beyond even the name "God." The highest knowledge of the divine, he wrote, is a kind of unknowing, a darkness that is brighter than any light. His influence ran through the whole of Christian mysticism. Centuries later, the German Dominican Meister Eckhart startled his listeners by praying to God to rid him of God: to free him from every limited concept of the

divine so that he might reach the Godhead beyond God, the silent desert where no distinction has ever entered.

In medieval Judaism, Moses Maimonides argued that we can say nothing positive about God at all; we can only say what God is not. And the Kabbalists spoke of *Ein Sof*, the Without End, the infinite and unknowable source from which the divine emanations flow.

In Islam, the Sufi tradition spoke of the divine Essence, *al-Dhat*, utterly beyond comprehension, which can be known only through its names and attributes, and never in itself.

East and West, ancient and medieval, Hindu and Taoist and Greek and Christian and Jewish and Muslim: the same insight appears again and again, as though the human mind, pushed to its limit, keeps arriving at the same shoreline. At the root of all things there is a Reality that cannot be grasped, named, or conceived, because it is the very ground from which grasping, naming, and conceiving arise.

Blavatsky knew this tradition well, and she claimed it as her own. The Absolute of the Secret Doctrine is the One of Plotinus, the Ein Sof of the Kabbalah, the Godhead of Eckhart, the Parabrahman of the Vedanta, the Tao that cannot be named. She did not invent it. She inherited it, and she placed it at the very foundation of her cosmology, where it belongs.

## Why Nothing Can Be Said

But why? Why should ultimate Reality be unknowable? Is this simply a confession of ignorance dressed up in grand language, or is there a reason for it?

There is a reason, and it is worth understanding carefully, because it is the key to everything that follows.

Consider what it means to say anything about anything. To say that a thing is red is to say that it is not blue, not green, not any other color. To say that a thing is here is to say that it is not there. To say that a

thing is large is to say that it is not small. Every positive statement carries a negation inside it. Every definition draws a boundary, and a boundary has two sides.

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza, a seventeenth-century lens grinder who was excommunicated from his synagogue in Amsterdam for his ideas, put this in a famous formula: *all determination is negation*. To determine a thing, to say what it is, is at the same time to say what it is not. And this means that every quality we attribute to something limits it. A thing that is red is limited to redness. A thing that is here is limited to hereness. A thing that is good, in any sense we can understand, is limited to that kind of goodness, which excludes other kinds.

Now apply this to the Absolute. The Absolute, by definition, is unlimited. It is boundless, infinite, unconditioned. That is what the word *absolute* means: from the Latin *absolutus*, loosed from, set free, released from every relation and every limit. But if the Absolute is unlimited, then no quality can be attributed to it without limiting it. To say that the Absolute is good would be to say that it is not evil, and thus to place it on one side of a boundary. To say that the Absolute is conscious would be to say that it is not unconscious, and thus to make it one kind of thing as opposed to another. To say that the Absolute exists would be to set it against non-existence, and thus to make it a thing among things, even if the greatest of them.

None of these statements can be true of the Absolute without making it something less than Absolute. That is why Blavatsky insists that it is beyond all speculation. That is why Yajnavalkya says *neti, neti*. That is why Plotinus places the One beyond being. It is not that we lack the right words. It is that words, by their very nature, work by drawing boundaries, and the Absolute has none.

There is a second reason, closely related to the first. Knowledge, as we ordinarily understand it, requires a knower and a known. There is a subject who knows and an object that is known, and knowing is the

relation between them. But the Absolute is not one thing that could stand over against another. It is not an object that a subject could know, because it is the ground of both subject and object. To make the Absolute an object of knowledge would be to place it outside the knower, and then it would no longer be absolute; it would be one term in a relation, limited by the other term.

An old image from the Indian tradition makes the point vividly. The eye can see everything except itself. It can see mountains and rivers and faces and stars, but it cannot turn around and see the seeing. Not because the seeing is hidden, but because it is what is doing the looking. In the same way, the Absolute cannot be known as an object, not because it is far away, but because it is too close. It is the very condition of knowing. It is the light by which everything else is seen, and light does not see itself by being lit.

## The Condition for Appearance

If nothing can be said of the Absolute, one might well ask why anyone should care about it. What difference does an unknowable Principle make to anyone?

The answer is that it makes all the difference in the world, because it is the condition for the appearance of the world.

Consider space. Blavatsky herself uses space as one of her favorite symbols of the Absolute, and the image repays reflection. Space is not a thing in the room. It is not the chair, not the table, not the lamp, not you. You cannot point to it, because whatever you point to is something in space. You cannot touch it, weigh it, measure its color. In one sense space is nothing at all. And yet without space, there would be no room, no chair, no table, no lamp, no you. Space is not one of the things; it is that which allows there to be things. It is the condition for their appearance. Everything in the room is in space, and space is not diminished or disturbed by anything in it. Break the

lamp, and the space is unharmed. Remove every object, and the space remains, exactly as it was.

Or consider silence and music. A piece of music is made of sounds, but it is also made of the silence within which the sounds occur. Without silence, there would be no music, only a continuous undifferentiated noise. The silence is not one of the notes. It cannot be played. And yet every note depends on it, arises from it, and returns to it. The silence before the first note and after the last is not empty. It is full of everything the music will be and has been.

Or consider a cinema screen. On the screen there are cities, oceans, love affairs, wars, deaths, and births. Fires burn on it, but the screen is not burned. Floods sweep across it, but the screen is not wet. Without the screen, there would be no film, only light scattered uselessly in the dark. The screen takes on every image and is changed by none. It is the condition for the appearance of the story.

These images are imperfect, as all images of the Absolute must be. Space, silence, and the screen are all still things, still limited, still part of the relative world. But they point toward something important. The Absolute is not an object among other objects. It is the condition for the appearance of any object at all. It is not the first cause in a line of causes; it is that in which causation itself takes place. It is not the greatest being; it is that without which there would be no being.

This is the insight that unites Blavatsky with the deepest traditions of classical metaphysics. Spinoza called it Substance: that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, the single reality of which all particular things are modes or modifications, as waves are modifications of the sea. The German Idealists of the early nineteenth century, Schelling and Hegel above all, spoke of the Absolute as the identity underlying the apparent opposition of subject and object, mind and nature. Each of these thinkers developed the idea in his own way, and none of them carries the specific cosmological and evolutionary implications that Blavatsky draws from it. But the

essential point is shared. Ultimate Reality cannot be an object among other objects. It is the ground in which objects appear.

## Why the Infinite Frightens Us

Not everyone who looks up at the night sky feels what Daniel felt.

In the seventeenth century, the French mathematician and religious thinker Blaise Pascal stood under the same stars and felt something very different. In one of the fragments that were gathered after his death into the book we call the *Pensées*, he wrote a single, chilling sentence: *The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.*

Pascal was one of the greatest minds of his age. He invented a calculating machine, laid the foundations of probability theory, and made important discoveries in physics. He was also a man of deep and anguished faith. And when he contemplated the newly enlarged universe that the astronomy of his time had revealed, a universe no longer bounded by the crystal spheres of the medieval cosmos but stretching away without limit in every direction, he felt not wonder but terror. The human being, he wrote elsewhere, is suspended between two abysses, the infinitely large and the infinitely small, lost in a corner of the universe without knowing who put him there or what he is doing there.

Many people share Pascal's fear, even if they have never put it into words. The vastness of the universe can feel crushing. Light from the nearest large galaxy left it more than two million years ago. There are more stars in the observable universe than grains of sand on all the beaches of the earth. Against that scale, a single human life can seem utterly insignificant: a flicker, a mote of dust, an accident of no importance to anything. The infinite, approached this way, does not comfort. It erases.

Why did Daniel feel peace where Pascal felt dread? They were looking at the same sky.

The difference, we believe, lies not in what they saw but in who was looking. Pascal looked at the infinite from the standpoint of the separate, finite self: a small, bounded creature standing over against an immense and indifferent cosmos. From that standpoint, the infinite is necessarily terrifying, because it is everything the small self is not. It is boundless where the self is bounded, eternal where the self is mortal, silent where the self longs to be heard. The more the separate self contemplates the infinite, the smaller and more alone it feels.

Daniel, without knowing it, had shifted his standpoint. In the desert, his mind went quiet, and the separate self, with its endless circling thoughts, relaxed its grip. And when it relaxed, he discovered that he was not standing over against the infinite at all. He was *in* it. More than that: the awareness with which he was looking at the stars was itself continuous with whatever the stars were floating in. "It made my problems the right size," he said. It did not make *him* small. It made his problems small, because it revealed that he was not merely the one who had the problems. He was also, at a deeper level, the vastness itself.

This is the difference between encountering the Absolute as an object and recognizing it as one's own ground. As an object, the infinite is overwhelming, because no finite thing can stand before the infinite without being dwarfed. As one's own ground, the infinite is the deepest possible security, because nothing that happens to the finite self can touch it.

Pascal himself, it should be said, eventually found his way through the terror. On the night of the twenty-third of November, 1654, he had an experience that changed his life. He wrote an account of it on a scrap of paper and sewed the paper into the lining of his coat, where it was found after his death. It begins with a single word, written in capital letters: *FIRE*. And it goes on to speak of certainty, of feeling, of joy, of peace. Whatever Pascal encountered that night, it was not the silent, indifferent infinity of the night sky. It was the infinite as

presence, as living fire, as the ground of his own being. He carried that piece of paper next to his heart for the rest of his life.

The infinite spaces are silent, as Pascal said. But the silence is not empty. It is the silence before the first note of the music, full of everything the music will be. And when the listener discovers that the silence is not outside them but within them, the terror turns, as it did for Pascal on his night of fire, into something that can only be called joy.

## Two Ways of Looking at One Reality

Ernest Holmes, writing in Los Angeles in the 1920s, approached all of this from an entirely different direction.

Holmes was not much interested in what could not be said. He was interested in what could be done. He spoke of Universal Mind, of Spirit, of First Cause, of a creative Intelligence present throughout all that is. Where Blavatsky stood at the edge of the unknowable and bowed, Holmes rolled up his sleeves. His language is functional, direct, practical. He wanted his students to understand how Spirit works, so that they could cooperate with it.

At first glance, these two approaches seem to contradict each other. Blavatsky says the ultimate Reality is beyond all predicates, beyond even mind. Holmes says it is Mind. Which is right?

Both are, because they are not talking about quite the same aspect of the same thing.

The Absolute of the Secret Doctrine is Reality considered in itself: prior to and beyond all relation, all manifestation, all distinction. Universal Mind, in Holmes's teaching, is that same Reality considered in its relation to manifestation: as the creative principle through which the finite world appears. Blavatsky is looking at the ocean in its fathomless depths, where no wave has ever stirred. Holmes is looking at the ocean as it rises into waves, moves the tides, and lifts the ships.

It is the same ocean. But one can speak meaningfully of the waves in a way that one cannot speak of the depths.

Blavatsky herself makes this distinction, though in her own vocabulary. She distinguishes the absolutely unmanifest Principle from the first Logos, the first movement toward manifestation, and that again from the second and third Logoi, through which the universe takes shape. She speaks of Cosmic Ideation, of Mahat, the universal mind that comes into being when a universe is breathed forth. Recall the line from the first Stanza: *Universal mind was not*. Before manifestation, there was no universal mind, because there was nothing for it to contain or to express. Universal Mind, in Blavatsky's own scheme, is not the Absolute in itself, but the Absolute as it turns toward manifestation, the first great differentiation of the One into the activity of creation.

This is exactly what Holmes means by Universal Mind, even though he rarely troubled himself with the unmanifest depths beyond it. His Universal Mind is the creative aspect of Reality, the aspect that ideates, forms, and sustains the world. It is the Absolute facing outward.

And this means that the two teachings, far from contradicting each other, need each other. Without the Absolute, Universal Mind would be just another thing, the biggest thing, perhaps, but still a thing, still limited, still subject to the question "and what is *that* in?" Without Universal Mind, the Absolute would remain forever remote, a magnificent abstraction with no bearing on human life. The Absolute guarantees that Universal Mind is not merely a cosmic object. Universal Mind guarantees that the Absolute is not merely a philosophical limit. Together, they describe a Reality that is both utterly beyond us and utterly present to us, both transcendent and immanent, both the depth that cannot be fathomed and the wave that lifts us up.

## The Two Errors

This distinction may seem academic. It is not. It is of the greatest practical importance, because without it, students of both traditions tend to fall into one of two errors, each of which has caused a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

The first error belongs mostly to students of mental science. It is the error of treating Universal Mind as a kind of cosmic person who can be petitioned, persuaded, or bargained with.

We once knew a woman, a devoted and sincere student of New Thought, whose son was struggling with addiction. She prayed for him constantly, using every affirmation she had learned. But listen to how she prayed. "Please, please let him be well. I've been so faithful. I've done everything right. I've kept my thoughts positive. Please don't let this happen." Without ever quite realizing it, she had turned Universal Mind back into the anxious, bargaining relationship with a capricious deity that Holmes had spent his life trying to dismantle. She was trying to earn the healing through good behavior. She was afraid that a single negative thought would cause the universe to withdraw its favor. She was exhausted, terrified, and quietly blaming herself for every setback her son suffered.

What she needed to understand was that Universal Mind is not a person who can be pleased or displeased. It is not keeping score. It does not withhold its goodness until you have earned it, and it does not punish you for a moment of fear. It is the creative aspect of the Absolute, and the Absolute is not a being with moods. To approach it as one is to fall right back into the very theology that both Blavatsky and Holmes rejected.

The second error belongs mostly to students of Theosophy. It is the error of treating the Absolute as so remote, so abstract, so far beyond the reach of thought, that it has no bearing on daily life at all.

We have known students who could recite the three fundamental propositions from memory and explain the difference between the first and second Logos with great precision, and who lived lives of quiet desperation, cut off from any sense of the sacred in their actual days. For them, the Absolute was a concept at the top of a diagram, so far above the plane of ordinary life that it might as well not have existed. They had grasped the transcendence and lost the immanence. They had understood that the Absolute is beyond all things and forgotten that it is also within all things, nearer than breathing, the very ground of their own awareness.

The synthesis offered in this book avoids both errors. The Absolute is not a being that can be addressed, flattered, or feared. Yet every act of consciousness, every thought, every experience, occurs within the field of that Reality and is made of nothing else. Universal Mind is not separate from the Absolute. It is the Absolute in its creative aspect, and it is operating right now, in the room where you sit, in the mind that is reading these words.

## Nearer Than Breathing

This is perhaps the most astonishing implication of the whole teaching, and it is easy to miss. The Absolute is beyond all things, beyond all thought, beyond the furthest galaxy. And it is also the inmost nature of your own consciousness.

How can both of these be true?

They can be true because the Absolute is not located anywhere. It is not far away in space, because it is not in space at all; space is in it. It is not long ago in time, because it is not in time; time is in it. And so it is not "out there" any more than it is "in here." It is equally present everywhere, and therefore it is present here, exactly where you are, as the ground of your own awareness.

Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*, wrote that God was more inward to him than his own inmost self. The Sufi poets spoke of a

Beloved closer than the jugular vein. Alfred Tennyson, in a poem much loved in the New Thought movement, wrote that the divine is closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet. The Upanishads, as we shall see in later chapters, go further still, and declare that the deepest Self of each person, the Atman, is identical with Brahman, the ultimate ground of all.

This is why the Absolute, though it cannot be known as an object, can be realized as one's own deepest nature. You cannot look at it, because it is what is looking. But you can stop looking at everything else, and rest as the looking itself. You cannot think it, because it is the ground of thinking. But you can let thinking settle, as Daniel's thoughts settled under the desert sky, and notice what remains when thought falls quiet. What remains is not nothing. What remains is awareness itself, open, silent, boundless, and utterly at peace. That awareness is not the Absolute as an object of knowledge. But it is the place where the Absolute shines through most clearly in human experience. It is the window that looks out onto the sea.

## The Cloud of Unknowing

If the Absolute cannot be known as an object, how does a person approach it? The question is not merely theoretical. Over the centuries, the contemplative traditions have developed practical methods for exactly this, and one of the most beautiful comes from an unexpected source: a small book written in English in the fourteenth century by an anonymous author, probably a priest or monk, for a young person who wished to pursue the contemplative life.

The book is called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and its central teaching is startlingly close to everything we have said in this chapter. God, the author says, cannot be grasped by thought. However clever, however devout, however exalted our thoughts about God may be, they are still thoughts, and thoughts cannot reach what lies beyond all thinking. Between the soul and God, there is always a kind of darkness, a cloud

of unknowing. The soul cannot see through it by any effort of the intellect.

And so, the author advises, do not try. Instead, place all your thoughts, even your holy thoughts, beneath you, in what he calls a *cloud of forgetting*. Set aside everything you know, everything you have been taught, every image and idea. And then, with nothing but a naked intent of the will, a simple loving reaching-out, direct yourself toward the darkness above you. Beat upon that cloud of unknowing, he says, with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not leave off, whatever happens.

The author suggests a practical aid. Choose a single short word, a word of one syllable if possible, such as *God* or *love*, and hold it in your heart. Whenever thoughts arise and try to draw you away, do not argue with them or follow them. Simply return to the word. Let it be your shield and your spear. Use it to beat down every thought beneath the cloud of forgetting, and to reach, again and again, toward the cloud of unknowing above.

What happens, if one practices in this way? The author is honest: often, nothing seems to happen. The darkness remains dark. But over time, he says, the soul becomes accustomed to it, and begins to rest in it, and discovers that the darkness is not empty. It is full of a presence that cannot be seen or thought, but can be loved. And love, he says, can reach where thought cannot. *By love he may be gotten and holden; but by thought never.*

This is the apophatic way in practice: not a philosophical position but a discipline of attention. It is *neti, neti* turned into prayer. It is Plotinus stripping away everything that is not the One. It is Daniel in the desert, letting his circling thoughts fall silent until he felt the thing behind the dark.

We include it here because it shows that the unknowability of the Absolute is not a barrier to relationship but an invitation to a particular kind of relationship: one that goes beneath thought, into a

direct, wordless, loving attention. The Absolute cannot be known as an object. But it can be rested in. It can be reached toward. And in the reaching, the one who reaches discovers that they were never outside it at all.

The exercise at the end of this chapter draws on this ancient method. When you practice it, you are joining a long line of contemplatives who have sat in the dark, set their thoughts aside, and found, beyond all knowing, the ground of their own being.

## The Still Point

Anyone who has practiced a martial art seriously for many years eventually meets this stillness in an unexpected place: in the middle of action.

The Japanese tradition has a name for it: *mushin*, literally "no-mind." It does not mean unconsciousness. It means a state in which the ordinary chatter of the thinking mind has fallen silent, and action flows directly from a deeper source without the interference of hesitation, doubt, or self-consciousness. The great Zen teacher Takuan Sōhō, writing to a master swordsman in the seventeenth century, explained that the mind must not stop anywhere: not on the opponent's sword, not on one's own technique, not on the fear of death. A mind that stops anywhere is caught. A mind that stops nowhere is free, and a free mind responds to every situation perfectly, the way a mirror reflects whatever is placed before it.

In decades of training, one of us has found that the deepest moments in the practice are not moments of maximum effort. They are moments of maximum stillness. Before a breaking technique, before a throw, before the instant of decision in sparring, there is a place where everything stops. The breath is quiet. The mind is quiet. There is no thought of success or failure. And in that stillness, something larger than the personal self seems to be present, and the action, when it comes, comes from there. It is fast and powerful and exact,

and it does not feel like something the ego did. It feels like something that happened *through* the person, from a source deeper than the person.

The stillness before the strike is not the Absolute. Nothing that can be experienced is the Absolute. But it is a doorway, and it opens onto the same Reality that Daniel felt under the stars, that Plotinus touched in his solitude, that Yajnavalkya pointed toward with his *neti, neti*. Every tradition of contemplative practice, whether it involves sitting still on a cushion or moving with total commitment through a technique, is ultimately a way of returning to that stillness and letting it become the ground from which one lives.

## What "All Is Mind" Means and Does Not Mean

We are now in a position to say something important about a phrase that will recur throughout these volumes, and that is very often misunderstood: "All is Mind."

When we say that all is Mind, we are not claiming that the finite universe is unreal, a dream or an illusion that can be dismissed. The chair you sit on is real. The body that carries you is real. The suffering of the people around you is real. To deny the reality of the relative world is a spiritual bypass, a way of escaping responsibility for the actual conditions of life, and both Blavatsky and Holmes, rightly understood, reject it.

Nor are we claiming that the individual human being is the sole creator of everything that appears. You did not make the sun. You did not make the mountains, or the laws of physics, or the other people in your life. The individual mind is a center of creative activity within Universal Mind, but it is one center among countless others, operating within a vast field of causes that long precede it and will long outlast it.

What we are claiming is this: that the ultimate nature of Reality is mental or spiritual rather than material; that the laws governing the

appearance of form are, at bottom, the laws of mind; that the Absolute, forever beyond every definition, is also the inmost nature of every center of consciousness; and that because of this, the individual is never cut off from the source of all creative power.

This is the metaphysical foundation on which everything else in these volumes will rest. The evolutionary vision of the Secret Doctrine, which Volume II will explore, is the story of how the Absolute expresses itself through vast cycles of manifestation, and of how consciousness slowly awakens to its own nature across those cycles. The practical techniques of the Science of Mind, which Volume III will present in full, are ways of consciously cooperating with that expression. Both rest on the recognition that the Absolute is not somewhere else. It is here. It is the ground beneath your feet and the awareness behind your eyes.

## Daniel, Again

We saw Daniel again a year or so after our first conversation. He still drove out to the desert sometimes, he said, but less often. He did not need to as much.

"I figured out that the thing behind the dark isn't only out there," he told us. "It's here too." He tapped his chest, and then, a little self-consciously, his forehead. "It's the same thing. When I'm lying out there, I'm not really looking at the sky. I'm just letting myself notice what's always been underneath. And I can do that in the house now. Not always. But sometimes. I'll be standing at the sink, or sitting with my wife, or I'll wake up at three in the morning with the old stuff coming at me, and I'll just stop, and drop down into it. And it's there. It's always there."

We asked him what difference it made.

He thought for a long time. "The stuff that happened over there still happened," he said finally. "I'm not going to pretend it didn't. Some of it I'm still carrying. But I don't feel like I'm carrying it alone anymore,

and I don't feel like it's the deepest thing about me. There's something underneath it that it never touched. It couldn't touch it. That's what I didn't know before. I thought I was what happened to me. I'm not. I'm the thing it happened *in*."

We could not have said it better ourselves.

## Practical Implications

The reader who has grasped this chapter will no longer oscillate between a remote Absolute and a usable Universal Mind. They are two ways of speaking about the same Reality, the one emphasizing its transcendence, the other its immanence and creative activity. Both are necessary. Neither is complete without the other.

In practical terms, this means three things.

First, you can stop bargaining. Whatever your spiritual practice, if it contains any element of trying to persuade, placate, or earn the favor of the divine, you can let that go. The Absolute is not a being with moods. Universal Mind is not keeping score. The goodness of Reality is not withheld until you deserve it. It is the nature of what is.

Second, you can stop feeling that the sacred is far away. The Absolute is beyond all things, but it is not distant. It is the ground of your own awareness, here and now, in exactly the circumstances you find yourself in. You do not need to climb a mountain or travel to a temple to find it. You need only to stop, and notice what has been present all along.

Third, you can begin to understand why stillness matters. Every effective practice described in these volumes, every treatment, every affirmation, every act of conscious creation, begins from stillness and is only as effective as the stillness it comes from. This is not a technique. It is a consequence of the nature of things. Action that arises from the ground of being carries the power of that ground. Action that arises from agitation carries only agitation.

## Exercise: Resting in What Cannot Be Named

Set aside fifteen minutes when you will not be disturbed. Sit comfortably, with your back reasonably straight, and let your eyes close or rest softly on the floor in front of you.

Begin by noticing your body. Feel its weight, its warmth, the sensations of contact with the chair or the floor. Then, gently, say to yourself: *I am aware of my body. But I am not only my body.* Not this.

Notice your feelings, whatever they are: calm or agitation, sadness or contentment. Do not try to change them. Simply notice them. Then say: *I am aware of my feelings. But I am not only my feelings.* Not this.

Notice your thoughts as they come and go, like clouds crossing the sky. Do not follow them. Simply notice them arise and pass. Then say: *I am aware of my thoughts. But I am not only my thoughts.* Not this.

Notice even your ideas about the divine, about the Absolute, about Universal Mind, about this exercise. These too are thoughts. Then say: *I am aware of my ideas of God. But the Reality is beyond all ideas.* Not this.

Now let go of saying anything at all. Simply rest as the awareness in which body, feelings, thoughts, and ideas have been appearing. Do not try to see it or grasp it. You cannot; it is what is doing the seeing. Simply rest as it, the way you would rest in warm water, letting it hold you.

If thoughts arise, let them. They are waves on the surface. You are resting in the depth.

At the end of fifteen minutes, before you open your eyes, say quietly to yourself: *This is always here. Whatever I do today, this is the ground I stand on.*

Then rise and go about your day. Several times during the day, for even a few seconds, stop and drop back down into that awareness. At the sink. In traffic. Before a difficult conversation. You are not trying to have a special experience. You are simply remembering where you live.

**CONTINUE THE JOURNEY**

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